National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Trail of Tears National Historic Trail
Tennessee, North Carolina,
Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, Illinois,
Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma

. . . the government might more mercifully have put to death everyone under a year or over sixty; rather it had chosen a most expensive and painful way of exterminating these poor people.

—Missionary Daniel Butrick

Cherokee Nation

A traveler through the southern Appalachians realizes that something is missing from the forested mountains and cascading streams. The people who once lived here no longer work the land or hunt the forests. Their spirits remain and their language is on the landscape, but most of them are gone. Where did they go? Do they survive? The answers are on the Trail of Tears.

In the 1600s about 25,000 Cherokee lived on lands stretching from the Ohio River to northern Georgia. But European diseases devastated the Cherokee throughout the 1700s, and by 1819 Americans' unquenchable thirst for land had whittled away Cherokee lands—down to 10 percent of their original territory.

Still, they endured. Cherokee Sacred Fire—rekindled each spring in the New Fire Ceremony and the source of every home fire—shone over a unified Cherokee Nation. Adopting many of the political and economic features of the United States, they drafted a constitution, established their own courts, and created a written language. As a symbol of their revival, their newspaper was named the *Cherokee Phoenix*, after the mythical bird reborn of fire. The Cherokee people had shaped a stable and prosperous life—one envied by their white neighbors.

The Removal Act

From the time Europeans arrived in the New World, they struggled with how to live alongside native people. In 1803 Thomas Jefferson became the first president to publicly support removing Indians, and for the next 25 years eastern tribes were forced west. Some of the Cherokee (known as the "Old Settlers") moved west on their own to distance themselves from the expanding American republic.

Events accelerated after Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828. In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, providing "for an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the states or territories, and for their removal west of the river Mississippi." Meanwhile the state of Georgia, home to the Cherokee, passed laws prohibiting them from conducting tribal business, testifying against whites, and mining for gold.

The Cherokee Nation, though, had produced leaders well versed in the US legal system, leaders who fought back. In *Worcester v. Georgia* the US Supreme Court, headed by Chief Justice John Marshall, ruled in 1832 that the Cherokee held sovereign land rights. President Jackson openly dismissed the ruling. The Cherokee were running out of options.

The Gathering Storm

On the heels of the Indian Removal Act, government agents descended on the southeastern native peoples. One by one the tribes were removed. Agents coerced Choctaw chiefs in Mississippi to sign the first removal treaty, and in late 1831 the tribe was quickly moved to Indian Territory—present-day Oklahoma.

The government removed most Muscogee Creeks, many in chains, from Alabama and Georgia to Indian Territory by 1836. The Chickasaw, whose homeland had once stretched from Tennessee to Arkansas and Illinois, were taken away by the end of 1837. The Seminoles fiercely resisted removal from their Florida homeland but, after great losses in the Seminole Wars, some 4,000 people were deported to Indian Territory by 1842.

The Cherokee resisted removal and looked to their leaders to sway American political opinion. Still, 20 tribal members, led by Major Ridge and acting outside the authority of the Cherokee government, signed the Treaty of New Echota in 1835. The conditions for removal were set: In exchange for $5 million the tribe would relocate to Indian Territory. Though the majority of Cherokee protested the agreement, by May 1836 Congress made it law. The treaty gave the Cherokee two years to voluntarily move.

Cherokee Trail of Tears

Most Cherokee refused to recognize the Treaty of New Echota; few had moved after two years. In the spring of 1838, 7,000 soldiers under Gen. Winfield Scott moved against the Cherokee Nation. The removal effort began in Georgia, where Cherokee families were uprooted and driven—sometimes at bayonet point—to "round-up" camps, then concentrated in larger removal camps.

In June the army loaded Cherokee onto flatboats that traveled the Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi, and Arkansas rivers to Indian Territory. The first boat reached its goal in 13 days, but desertions and fatalities plagued the next two groups. Diseases raged through the cramped, poorly-supplied boats.

To save his people, Principal Chief John Ross petitioned General Scott to let the Cherokee control their own removal. Ross organized detachments of about 1,000 each, and the Cherokee traveled by foot, horse, and wagon for 800 miles, taking up to eight months to reach Indian Territory. Despite prearranged supply points, they suffered terribly during the hard winter. Of about 15,000 Cherokee forced from their homes, many hundreds died in the camps or on the journey. The Cherokee Nation remained alive though, in the spirits of the people and in the ashes saved from the Sacred Fire they carried along the trail.

A Nation Renewed

Weak and traumatized, 17 detachments of Cherokee arrived in Indian Territory in 1838 and 1839. The treaty strife and the harsh removal had also divided the Cherokee into three factions: pro-treaty, anti-treaty, and the "Old Settlers."

Despite the political discord, the Cherokee reconstructed their lives. In September 1839 delegates signed a constitution. The tribe reelected John Ross as Principal Chief and Tahlequah became the Cherokee capital. In 1844 the Cherokee Supreme Court building opened its doors. The *Cherokee Advocate*, a bilingual newspaper, began publication. By 1846 the three factions had signed a treaty that addressed many of their differences. The Sacred Fire of the Cherokee Nation burned again.

Meeting other challenges as they rebuilt their nation, the Cherokee proved resilient in the ensuing years. Today the Cherokee and other removed tribes endure as vigorous Indian nations. The Trail of Tears story is one of racial injustice, intolerance, and suffering. But this is also a story of survival, of a people thriving in the present while remembering the past—not only in Oklahoma, but in the homelands of southern Appalachia.

Dwindling Cherokee Lands

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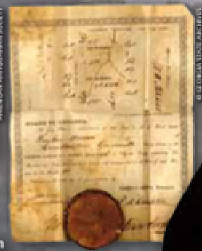
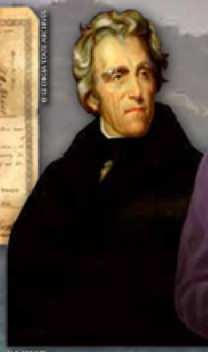


Far left: Lands of the Cherokee people were steadily reduced in the 100 years before their removal. *Left:* Sequoyah (George Gist) completed an 86-character Cherokee syllabary in 1821, enabling many Cherokee to become literate. *Above:* Their newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, was bilingual.



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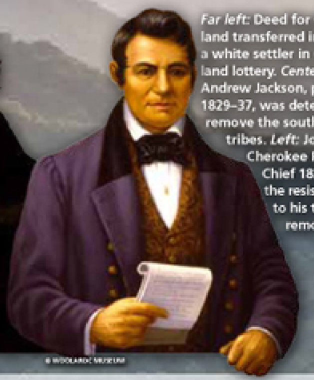

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Far left: Deed for Cherokee land transferred in 1832 to a white settler in Georgia's land lottery. *Center left:* Andrew Jackson, president 1829–37, was determined to remove the southeastern tribes. *Left:* John Ross, Cherokee Principal Chief 1828–66, led the resistance to his tribe's removal.

Left: Blocked by icebound rivers, many Cherokee endured weeks of harsh winter weather without adequate clothing. *Right:* The five "Civilized Tribes" were removed from their homelands in the 1830s.

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Southeast Indian Removal

1721 The Cherokee sign the first of several treaties that, over the next 70 years, force them to cede over half their lands.

1791 (July 2) The Treaty of Holston places the Cherokee under US protection.

1828 The discovery of gold in northern Georgia leads to the "Georgia Gold Rush" the following year, much of it on Cherokee lands.

1830 (May 26) Congress passes the Indian Removal Act; President Andrew Jackson signs it into law two days later.

1832 Lotteries are held for appropriated Cherokee lands in Georgia.

1832 (March 3) In *Worcester v. Georgia* the US Supreme Court confirms that the Cherokee Indians are a nation holding distinct sovereign powers.

1835 (Dec. 29) Twenty "treaty party" leaders sign the Treaty of New Echota, which leads to Cherokee removal.

1838 (May) Cherokee are forcibly removed from their homes and marched to nearby temporary camps and forts.

1838 A group of North Carolina Cherokee avoid removal because they live on land ceded to them by earlier treaties. These Cherokee are the basis for today's Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

1838 (Aug. 23) Cherokee Hair Conrad leads the first land route detachment out of Fort Cass, Tennessee. Twelve more detachments depart over the next two months, most traveling by the northern route.

1838 (Sept. 28) Cherokee leader John Benge leads a detachment out of Fort Payne, Alabama.

1838 (Oct. 11) John Bell, a white man married to a Cherokee woman, leads 660 pro-treaty Cherokee to Indian Territory.

1839 (Jan. 4) The first land route detachment, led by Cherokee Elijah Hicks, arrives in Indian Territory; final detachments arrive in late March.

1839 (Sept. 6) Cherokee delegates sign a constitution for the reunited Cherokee Nation.

1987 Congress establishes the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. In 2009 more routes are added.

One will not hear the anguished voice of a forgotten and broken people. Instead one might hear the pride of people who faced overwhelming adversity and persevered.

—Cherokee Nation

Trail of Tears
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The Trail of Tears, by Max D. Standley, portrays displaced Cherokee on the long road from their old home in Appalachia to their new one in Indian Territory.

© MAX D. STANDLEY / R. MICHELSON GALLERIES

The Appalachian Mountains in eastern Tennessee and North Carolina were home and hunting grounds to countless generations of Cherokee people before they were forcibly removed.